

San Bernardino County Sun

SoCal living grows harder

Air pollution, congestion go up, jobs, wages go down in 2003, report says

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Thursday, February 05, 2004 - The quality of life across the six-county Southern California region has slipped, with smog, traffic, job opportunities and income levels growing worse and housing and education just barely passing, a report released Thursday shows.

The annual report card from the Southern California Association of Governments saw no improvement in any of the seven areas it compared to data for 2002.

And SCAG warned there was little hope for an early improvement with traffic, education, air quality and even public safety likely to suffer because of the state's financial crisis and harsh cuts expected in public spending.

Transportation funding is also on the chopping block in Sacramento, and the SCAG region faces a \$4.3 billion shortfall for road and transit projects.

Officials acknowledged the picture the grades painted was grim, but said it could brighten in the future as an improving economy generates more jobs and raises income.

"Probably the report next year will be somewhat comparable, if not maybe even a little bit worse, than this year's. Then we'll start to see it get better just as we start to see the economy getting better," said Bev Perry, the president of SCAG and a Brea City Council member.

The report said the national recession helped drag down employment and income grades, already horrendous traffic congestion just grew worse, and an increase in the number of smoggy days caused air quality to slip from a B-minus to a C.

More cars on the road and more congestion translates to even more air pollution for residents.

Even worse, the SCAG region San Bernardino, Riverside, Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura and Imperial counties could lose an additional \$8 billion in federal transportation funding if it fails to meet clean-air goals.

"People are going to be faced with a choice of, 'Are we willing to step up and pay for some of the things that need to be done to improve our quality of life?'" Perry said.

The report said the poor grades for 2002 also reflect broader problems in Southern California:

The loss of middle-class jobs.

A population fast outgrowing the region's infrastructure.

Poor educational resources to help low-wage earners and their children climb the economic ladder.

Southern California added 33,000 residents in 2002, a boom that continued from 2001, when the region's population grew at a rate not seen since 1950. Homegrown births accounted for half of the new residents, and foreign immigrants accounted for 41 percent of the increase.

The region saw unemployment numbers rise, a 22,000 net loss in jobs and per capita personal income decline. Especially troubling, officials said, is that one in five children in the region live in poverty.

Yet Southern California still weathered the national economic downturn better than most of the state, especially the San

Francisco Bay area.

Manufacturers, publishers, Internet-related businesses and the motion picture industry were the hardest hit. On the rise were retail, real estate-related businesses and government jobs, thanks to new teacher spots.

Jack Kyser, chief economist with the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp., said the region is beginning to create new good-paying jobs in 2004, particularly in the aerospace industry, which has received new government contracts.

But regional leaders need to focus on creating jobs for the middle class, he said.

"When anyone thinks of economic development in Southern California, it's always couched in retail," Kyser said. "Too many leaders think all the manufacturers have gone away or say we can't compete with China."

To house the booming population, builders pulled permits for 68,000 new units, the largest increase since 1990. Low mortgage rates have fueled home sales but also pushed up sticker prices.

In the Inland Empire booming because it's the last bastion of affordable housing in Southern California 43 percent of households can buy a median-priced home, down from 48 percent in 2001.

Regionwide, single-family homes make up 70 percent of new building permits. However, in Los Angeles, where a house, driveway, back yard and orange tree have been central to post-war culture, apartments make up 60 percent of new building permits.

The American dream of homeownership became more elusive in 2002 with 69 percent of households in Los Angeles County unable to afford a median-priced home of roughly \$300,000. In Orange County, only 22 percent of households can afford a median-priced home.

However, there's a big downside to the housing construction boom.

"It's not just if housing is being built; it's where it's being built and how close to jobs," said Stuart Gabriel, director of the Lusk Center for Real Estate at USC. "People are finding affordable housing in outlying areas but haven't found jobs out there."

That leads to long commutes, more cars idling in traffic and more air pollution.

Southern California's air-quality grade took a drop in 2002, due in large part to an increase in smoggy days. There were 49 days in the summer of 2002 that exceeded the national health standard for ozone, the key ingredient in smog. That's compared to 36 days in 2001.

But the 2003 grade will likely be even worse because there were 63 days over the national health standard.

The report points to poor weather systems, growth in the Inland Empire and Southern Californians driving more trucks and SUVs.

Officials at the South Coast Air Quality Management District say especially hot and stagnant weather is partly to blame but the region clearly must do more to cut pollution from vehicles, which make up 75 percent of the ozone problem.

"Is this a significant drop in quality of life? We hope it's just a blip," AQMD spokesman Sam Atwood said.

Southern California's education grade remained low, and SCAG officials took heart that schools didn't get worse. Eighth-graders in all counties, except Orange and Ventura, still perform below the national median in reading and math.

In all counties, less than 40 percent of high school students take the courses needed to get into the University of California and California State University systems, which are major stepping stones to improving their quality of life.

The public safety grade also remained consistent, though violent crime rate dropped 3 percent from 2001 and juvenile felony arrests dropped 9 percent.

"I was thinking when I looked at the grades that if the Southern California region was a state, we'd probably recall the governor," quipped Riverside Mayor Ronald Loveridge.